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SUBJECT: HONDURAN FORESTRY UNDER PRESSURE

¶1. (U) Summary: Despite moderate progress recently, the Honduran deforestation rate has remained steady at about 2-3 percent a year, according to informed sources. Honduras lost about 37 percent of its forests from 1990 to 2005. Though a new forestry law will offer additional protection for already protected areas, it most likely will only keep deforestation from worsening. Few expect the Honduran forest situation to improve significantly over the long term. End summary.

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A Junket to the Jungle  
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¶2. (U) In early February, Econoff accompanied President Zelaya, much of his cabinet, members of the diplomatic corps and other notables to the Rio Platano Biosphere Reserve in a remote area of Olancho Department in Eastern Honduras. The purpose of the trip was to showcase GOH efforts to protect the forest as well as the skills of the Honduran Armed Forces, who provided logistics support.

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State of Forests in Honduras  
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¶3. (U) Honduras has the most intact tropical forests in Central America, thanks primarily to their inaccessibility. Over 75 percent of Honduras is or was forest, primarily pine. Tropical woods such as mahogany and cedar are prevalent in protected areas. According to various GOH and NGO sources, population growth, poverty and lack of planning have contributed to deforestation of between two and three percent a year over the past few decades. According to Honduran Forestry Service (COHDEFOR) Director, Ramon Alvarez, who worked 20 years for USAID, burning of wood for fuel is the primary cause of deforestation. Over half of Honduras's total energy demand is met by firewood. One well respected forest group conducted a study that revealed the average rural family cuts down and consumes 30 trees a year for fuel. The second largest cause of deforestation is clearing land for agriculture, followed by logging for lumber to build houses and furniture. As neither fuel wood consumption nor clearing land require logs to be transported over a significant distance, these activities are hard to prevent within protected areas.

¶4. (U) Alvarez said that under President Zelaya the number of COHDEFOR employees had been reduced from 800 to 350. This reduction in COHDEFOR staff has been partially offset by the

use of Honduran military to patrol forests since 2006. This tactic has had mixed results - while NGO representatives assert the military must patrol with "closed eyes," they acknowledge that the military presence has deterred some of the less politically connected from engaging in illegal forest product trade. All agree COHDEFOR is under-funded and under-staffed. Few people involved in the transport of illegal lumber are prosecuted, and virtually none of the "big fish" have been brought to justice.

¶15. (SBU) (Note: A trustworthy NGO told PolCouns that we could see a groundbreaking criminal suit against some of the more politically connected illegal loggers as early as March 2008, so their impunity may be threatened for the first time. End Note.)

¶16. (U) On the positive side, authorities recently adopted a new certificate for legal timber that is harder to counterfeit. GOH, NGO and other sources confirm the price of wood has increased significantly in recent years, a signal of scarcity that may lead to more concerted protective efforts.

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Rio Platano Biosphere Reserve  
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¶17. (U) The Rio Platano Biosphere Reserve covers 525,000 hectares -- roughly seven percent of the national territory. It comprises a central zone and a less protected buffer area, which has seen some encroachment. Holger Afflerbach from the German Technical Cooperation agency (GTZ) said the reserve was losing 10 hectares of forest a day. In 2007 the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) removed the Rio Platano reserve from the list of endangered World Heritage sites, based on actions the GOH has taken to reduce pressure on the biosphere. Those actions include enlarging the buffer zone in 1997, several current and future forest management projects, and significant GTZ involvement, including over USD 6 million in funding.

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New Forestry Law  
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¶18. (U) President Zelaya signed a new forestry law February 14 that, among other things, makes environmental damage to forests a crime and elevates COHDEFOR to ministerial status, although it will still technically be part of the Ministry of Agriculture. Agriculture Minister Hector Hernandez told EconOff implementing regulations for the new law were expected within six months. Afflerbach of GTZ said the new law was a significant, positive step for the protected areas, strengthening enforcement and clarifying important administrative details. Some environmental groups feel the law does not go far enough. They say it continues to favor land use over land conservation in the non-protected areas and emphasizes private property and investment rights over the benefits forests provide to the public, such as clean air and water. Nonetheless this is the first new forestry law in 35 years and suggests that despite resource constraints Zelaya is making an effort to protect the forests.

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Comment: What the Future Holds  
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¶19. (SBU) By encouraging the new forestry law, directing the military to assist in protecting the forests, and inviting his cabinet and the foreign diplomatic corps to visit the biosphere, President Zelaya has taken positive action to combat deforestation. Virtually all sources, including NGOs, tell us they believe Zelaya cares about the environment. On the other hand, many participants in the excursion to the biosphere felt that the trip was mainly for show, especially given the large number of invited media, and that the visit would not lead to improved forest protection. NGOs and even private businesses are more involved than the

GOH in many day to day environmental activities, such as finding green energy solutions, removing squatters from protected land, finding them alternate employment, monitoring forests, and providing financial assistance. Perhaps the best option for protecting the forests is regulated commercial harvesting and replanting of trees. Agroforestry in Honduras is still a relatively unexploited resource. With an appropriate emphasis on access controls, permits and replanting, those who make their living from the forests could both prosper financially and protect their future livelihood. For this to happen, additional laws will be required to address the non-protected forest areas of Honduras. End comment.

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